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UNCLAS LILONGWE 000143

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Elections: State Media Denying Equal Access

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B) 03 LILONGWE 1058

1. With May 2004 presidential and parliamentary elections approaching, state-owned radio and television persists in almost exclusively broadcasting ruling party campaigning and pro-government news. Neither the Electoral Commission nor the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority is willing to take any action to ensure balanced coverage. Unequal access to public media for the opposition during the run-up to the elections clearly jeopardizes Malawi's chances of holding free and fair elections.

2. Members of the donor community (UK, EU, Germany, France, Norway, UNDP and the U.S.) issued a joint statement on January 30 calling on the Information Ministry and Boards of Directors of state-owned Malawi Broadcasting Corporation and Television Malawi to ensure equitable coverage of all political parties. Minister of Information Bernard Chisale dismissed donor concerns and insisted that the opposition would receive coverage of their events if they informed reporters of their functions and provided them transportation (as does the ruling party). This argument, however, is specious in that much of the reporting is not live and journalists often do not actually attend functions they report about.

3. Comment. Post has been producing a monthly overview of state radio news, highlighting partisan coverage. The reports have made the pro-government bias at state media crystal clear to a wide readership, including government officials, donors, and private media. There is almost no positive coverage of opposition news or opposition campaigning, and little prospect that the situation will change at least until the beginning of the "official" campaign period in late March. End comment.

Browning